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U.S. Studies Capabilities Of Migs Supplied to Cuba

By Don Oberdorfer

Washington Post Staff Writer

The United States has launched a high-priority intelligence study into the capabilities of Mig 23 warplanes recently supplied to Cuba by the Soviet Union, U.S. officials said yesterday.

It has not yet been determined whether the sophisticated jets are equipped in a way that would permit them to deliver nuclear weapons, the officials said. Some Mig 23s are capable of nuclear delivery.

There is so far no evidence, according to government sources, of the presence of nuclear weapons in Cuba.

A wary Carter administration, upset by the leak of a top-secret Pentagon memorandum on the subject to columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, limited itself yesterday to only the most sparing comment on the topic of the Migs.

If the warplanes do turn out to be of the nuclear-capable variety, this could be considered a violation of the 1962 U.S.-Soviet understanding that ended the Cuban missile crisis. At that time, the Russians withdrew ballistic missiles and IL28 bombers from Cuba in return for an end of the U.S. "quarantine" of the island and an understanding that the United States would not invade.

The 1962 understanding, which was studied and cited again by the Nixon administration when the Soviets appeared to be constructing a submarine base in Cuba in 1970, is not precise. But according to students of the full record, the thrust is clear that the Soviets are barred from placing "offensive weapons" in Cuba.

There is little doubt that a public argument with the Russians over whether the Mig 23s are permitted under the terms of 1962 agreement would be damaging to U.S.-Soviet relations and especially to the chances for Senate ratification of the strategic arms limitation treaty (SALT) which is in final stages of negotiation.

The press leaks of sensitive information about the case were read by officials as indications that a secret resolution of the matter is probably impossible. The leaks caused special concern because they were taken as forerunners of many more to come

in the highly charged debate over a controversial SALT II treaty.

The first report that the Mig 23 fighters were being supplied to Cuba by the Soviet Union came from Associated Press Pentagon correspondent Fred S. Hoffmann on Oct. 30. The Washington Post reported the following day, on the basis of its own inquiries, that intelligence reports of the shipments, apparently detected as freighters bearing big crates steamed toward Cuba, had caused concern but not alarm in the Pentagon hierarchy.

The concern was sharpened greatly by yesterday's Evans and Novak column, which quoted a top-secret memorandum of Oct. 23 from Defense Secretary Harold Brown to President Carter as saying that the Mig 23 deliveries present a problem of "high political sensitivity."

State Department spokeswoman Jill Schuker, in the only official statement on the subject, said "we have the matter under active investigation." Asked if the aircraft deliveries violate the 1962 understanding with the Soviets, she said, "We are actively pursuing the matter to develop the factual situation. We regard with the utmost seriousness understandings we have with the Soviet Union as well as with other countries."

Defense sources said the first signs of the Mig deliveries were noted over the summer. Some 12 to 15 aircraft are reported to be involved.

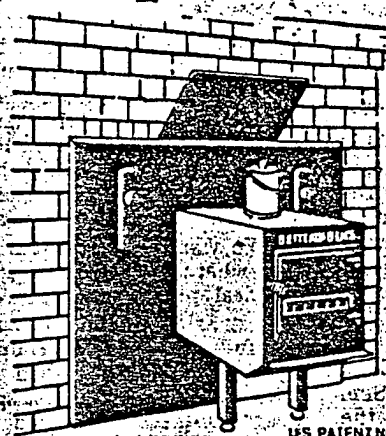
Cuba previously had been supplied with Mig 21 fighters, an aircraft widely exported by the Soviet Union. The Soviets have exported Mig 23 fighters to a number of Middle Eastern countries, but not in a configuration capable of delivering nuclear weapons.

2 Rescued From Jet Crash

L'ANSE, Mich. (AP)—Searchers, guided by flares, yesterday rescued the second of two Minnesota Air National Guard officers who parachuted from their reconnaissance jet before it crashed Tuesday night, state police said.

Maj. Edwin C. Culbert, 44, of Duluth, Minn., was picked up about one mile from where the pilot was rescued Tuesday night in sparsely populated Keweenaw Peninsula.

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